



Responding to God

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Mark 6:14-29

“You are not responsible for someone else’s decisions.” I had been counseling one struggling with some serious abuse and contemplating taking her life. What she faced bore down on me, and I struggled under the weight of her decisions. The school counselor knew the situation, and he told me I was not responsible for someone else’s decisions. Oppressive weight fell from my shoulders. I cannot assume responsibility for the decisions and choices of another. We can only bear the responsibility for our own actions, choices, and decisions. We cannot bear another’s responsibility before God. Each must carry our personal responsibility alone. How do we respond to God individually?

Amos recognized his nation was far from God’s purposes. Paul spoke of including gentiles in God’s redemptive purposes, as they trusted the word preached to them. Responding to God’s call, they joined God’s people, even as others rejected God’s redemption. God allowed the Jews to participate in or reject God’s redemptive purposes, allowing the Gentiles the same privilege. The blessings God offers us are not dependent upon what others do, but on how we respond to God’s actions and purposes.

Herod had heard of Jesus. Herod had heard of John the Baptist. He knew the message John had preached and saw the connection between John and Jesus. He had heard so much of it before. He had even used John the Baptist as a communication tool with God! He kept him at a comfortable distance, on a leash, as it were, uncertain what he would or should do with him.

It seems a little odd, but as John the Baptist had been preaching, he made reference to Herod’s adultery. Herod had taken his brother’s wife from him. When John called Herod out, he found himself imprisoned. Herod could not have John running about the countryside proclaiming that Herod was out of line with God’s purposes. He placed him in prison to squelch his critique. Then when it was convenient, he would have John brought out to consult him on God’s will!

Herod accepted John as a prophet of God. Herod knew John spoke God’s truth. Herod did not want John spreading the truth regarding God’s perspective on Herod’s actions. Then Herod calls John to speak God’s message to him as a consultant on God’s will. He wanted to know God’s will. He did not want to know God’s will. He considered John a prophet. He wanted to silence John. He wanted to hear what God had to say through John. He wanted to keep God’s message under wraps. Can one get much more confused and conflicted than that?

We live in a world that is often not as black-and-white as we want. We want the issues boiled down to simple answers, even though the questions are often much more complex than we would like them to be. We want the good guys to wear white hats and the bad guys to wear black. What we want often has no bearing on reality. Life is often more complicated, and even our own desires send mixed signals. On the other hand, there are times when the answers are cut-and-dried, but we are conflicted over our own mixed set of values.

Herod held power. Herod was concerned for God’s blessings on his life. Herod was concerned with God’s guidance and direction. Herod placed John the Baptist in custody for speaking a message in concert with God’s guidance. Herod would not have him killed, however, because he knew John spoke for God. Herod wanted to hear from God, but not in ways that would conflict with Herod’s own plans, desires, and ambitions. Herod wanted God to be on his side, supporting his every whim.

Then there was the party. It was not the kind of party we would encourage church members to attend. It was not very family-friendly, even though Herodias, the sister-in-law-become-wife, not only allowed her daughter to attend, but also dance seductively before the guests. Herod was taken with her.

The alcohol did not grant him any extra clarity of thought, but he offered her anything she asked up to half his kingdom. Under normal circumstances, that would have meant making her his queen, though he was already married to her mother.

She chose to talk with her mother about it. It was, after all, an offer that could make her family life very uncomfortable or bring her new opportunities of great consequence. She decided to call for the prophet's head on a platter.

Herod was now the one placed in a very uncomfortable situation. He knew what he needed to do. He knew what he was expected to do. He fully understood God's will. He fully understood the social expectations to fulfill his thoughtless vow to the girl. He fully understood John the Baptist to be a prophet speaking on God's behalf. He also knew that his response to the current situation would be irreversible.

He could no longer sit on the fence and watch with interest and at a safe distance the events in the lives of others. He could no longer delay a decision as to how, when, and whether he would accept God's plans and purposes as his own or definitively reject them. He could no longer feign interest in God's direction while following his own dreams, desires, and selfish interests. He must respond, either in following God's direction or turning his back on God.

There was no point in keeping John around if he would not accept a course of responsible action toward God. There was no point in using John as a conversation piece or religious entertainment. He was at a crossroads. He could turn his back on God or turn his back on his lifestyle, family, friends, and powerful associates. There was no point in listening to John's words, only to ignore them.

Up to that point, he had been able to keep his options open. Suddenly the fifty shades of grey were gone. He made the decision which had already become ingrained in his actions. He continued down the course he had already established for himself. Saddened by the realization that there was no turning back, he responded to God by denying God's plan and continuing down his own course.

The times he had listened to John's words mattered no longer. The times he had pondered God's role in his life lost their meaning. The times he had toyed with the implications of making good on God's design for life dissolved in a mist. His course was set and there was no turning back.

Herod could not accept John's relationship with God for his own. He could not pass off his responsibility toward John to Herodius, either. He had to assume responsibility for his own decisions and actions. His decisions were his own to make. His relationship to God was his own. Though others might influence it, the responsibility was still his own. The issues had been cloudy up to this point, but now he faced life's issues for what they truly were. Sure, his decisions impacted others, but whatever choice he made would be his and his alone.

Herod finally took the decision to turn from God with finality. Toying with God and curiosity over God's purposes and values came to an end. The real issue, however, is not what Herod did. The concern today is how we will respond to our listening to the demands, purposes, and directions that God has placed before us.

When Jesus calls us to love even our enemies, will we apply that to those family members who have failed us repeatedly? Will we extend God's love to the co-worker we dislike, the neighbor who despises us, and the rude, abusive customer we meet? Will the forgiveness Jesus displayed on the cross become reality in the way we interact with those who have injured us most deeply? It's easy to point our fingers at Herod and his absolute failures. It's quite another quit playing our own games and assume our full responsibility to respond to God amid the conflict of our own desires. The lights are out. The party's over. The music has faded. How will we respond? We can't hold onto God as a conversation piece forever. Are we ready to lay down our desires and assume our responsibility to serve God instead?

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